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Wisconsin State Senator • 4th District

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## Senate Committee on Judiciary, Corrections, and Housing

### Testimony of Senator Lena C Taylor

#### Senate Bill 382 – Sex Offender E-Disclosure Act

Tuesday, January 29<sup>th</sup>, 2008

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Honorable Senators,

Thank you for hearing testimony today on Senate Bill 382, the Sex Offender E-Disclosure Act. As the bill's Senate author, I am pleased to be here this afternoon in support of this valuable legislation to help protect Wisconsin's families from dangerous sex offenders.

Right now, there are over 9,000 registered sex offenders living in Wisconsin, many who are responsible for multiple sexual assaults. A recent study by the U.S. Department of Justice revealed that, compared to non-sex offenders, released sex offenders are more than four times as likely to be arrested for a sex crime. In fact, more than one in twenty convicted sex offenders will commit another sex crime. The rate is higher among those who commit child sexual assault. The considerable harm from sex offenses and sex offenders justifies reasonable measures to monitor and regulate the avenues used to offend.

For over a decade, Wisconsin has been a national leader in preventing sex offenses. In 1997, our state adopted Act 440, ~~allowing for collection and dissemination of information relating to certain sex~~ offenders. Act 440 laid the groundwork for Wisconsin's Sex Offender Registry, which is now among the most comprehensive and accessible registries in the nation. Parents can visit the Registry's website to look up updated photos, physical descriptions, and residential and occupational information for most Wisconsin sex offenders. Families can use that information to keep their kids away from unwanted interaction with sex offenders.

Today, though, the threat from sex offenders comes as much from online contact as it does from contact in schools, neighborhoods, or jobs. For example, administrators at myspace.com recently found more than 29,000 registered sex offenders with profiles on their site. The growing number of sex offender profiles on sites like myspace.com is one reason that one in five young people annually receives a sexual solicitation over the internet. Stories on the nightly news and shows like NBC's *To Catch a Predator* highlight the very real risk that these solicitations pose to our children.

Parents can take certain steps to limit the threat posed by sex offenders online. They can buy software preventing their kids from visiting certain websites. They can keep track of the websites their children visit. And they can remind their children about the importance of keeping personal information private.

We have a responsibility in the Legislature to assist parents in protecting their children. The Sex Offender Registry was created to address that responsibility, but it only deals with certain areas of risk. The Registry contains a bevy of information on sex offenders' physical characteristics and whereabouts.

However, it does nothing to help parents who want to protect their children from sex offenders on the internet. In fact, there isn't a single resource available that enables parents to find information on the websites and e-mail accounts that sex offenders use to contact young people. Mothers and fathers have no way of knowing whether their son or daughter is e-mailing a friend from school or a pedophile from a neighboring town.

There's no reason why our state's Sex Offender Registry should help parents protect their children in schools, neighborhoods, and jobs, but not online. The internet presents many of the same threats as schools, neighborhoods, and workplaces: Sex offenders can log in, come in contact with young people, build relationships with them, and learn personal information from them, much as they can at schools, neighborhoods, or jobs. In some ways, the threat is more pernicious because there are fewer ways for parents and members of the public to monitor the conversations kids have online.

The Sex Offender E-Disclosure Act provides valuable assistance to parents looking to shield their children from sex offenders on the internet. By requiring convicted sex offenders to divulge certain limited online information, the Act gives mothers and fathers a means to verify that their children are not putting themselves or their siblings at risk over the internet. The Act accomplishes all of this at a low cost to the state, by simply making a minor, commonsense addition to an existing program. As a legislator and as a parent, I urge you to approve Senate Bill 382. Thank you.

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